

HOWARD KIMELDORF INTERVIEWS FOR *REDS OR RACKETS*?
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WALT STACK OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY

INTERVIEWEE: WALT STACK

INTERVIEWERS: HOWARD KIMELDORF

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[00:00:00] **HOWARD KIMELDORF:** Ok, this is an interview with Walt Stack in San Francisco [California] on 5-28-82. Why don't you just begin by telling me how you got involved in the maritime industry?

[00:00:31] **WALT STACK:** Oh, I got out of the Army in October 1926, and I had to go to work somewhere. Since I was down around the waterfront roaming around, I was propositioned to go on a ship, somebody looking for a crew. Of course, they asked me if I had certain experience which I told them I had. So I was able to bullshit my way through there and got on a ship. That's how I happened to get started going to sea, strictly an accident.

[00:01:05] **HOWARD:** When did you end up in Seattle? What were the circumstances of that?

[00:01:09] **WALT:** Well, I was an organizer for the Marine Workers Industrial Union for a few years. I was active in Baltimore [Maryland] , and we organized the longshoremen in a strike down there, lumber handlers. It wound up in a big fight with the police, on the picket line strike, and I was sentenced to four years in the Maryland State Penitentiary. So I was willing to do the time because I felt very idealistically motivated and so on. But the union told me, “No, it’s a waste of your time. You might as well just—since you have an alternative of leaving the state and not coming back—well, do that.” So they sent me out to Seattle. The Marine Workers Industrial Union were having a problem with the chairman of our strike committee out there who was more concerned overall with the scabs and beating the hell out of them than he was with trying to work out ways and means to help win the strike. Of course, we were only one small part of the strike. You know, it was the seamen and longshoremen, 1934 strike.

[00:02:10] **HOWARD:** So what month did you actually go out to Seattle [Washington] , then? Do you remember?

[00:02:12] **WALT:** In July.

[00:02:13] **HOWARD:** July.

[00:02:14] **WALT:** The last three weeks of the ‘34 strike.

[00:02:16] **HOWARD:** Ok. Why don’t you tell me your impressions of the ‘34 strike in Seattle? Because I really didn’t get much information on that from the guys.

[00:02:24] **WALT:** Well, I couldn’t tell you too much, having been there only a few weeks. I was there long enough to be arrested in a picket line we threw out at Pier 41. They had the tear gas out there and so on. They threw a bunch of us in jail. I don’t know, maybe if you ask me something specific, I might be able to remember, but as far as the strike, it was just another strike.

[00:02:49] **HOWARD:** I remember reading that the Marine Workers Industrial Union Hall was arrested, you and about 35 other people.

[00:02:53] **WALT:** Yeah, yeah. They cleaned out the hall.

[00:02:56] **HOWARD:** I looked at the occupations of them, and I didn’t find one seamen—or one longshoremen who was among them.

[00:03:02] **WALT:** Yeah, well, our emphasis was always the seamen among the MWIU [Marine Workers Industrial Union] .

[00:03:08] **HOWARD:** Why?

[00:03:10] **WALT:** Well, I hadn’t given it much thought because they were the easiest to get to. More access to them. Longshoremen were generally organized in most ports over a number of years before that. Except, well, the Wobblies organized the Philadelphia longshoremen in 1923, and there was some Wobbly influence in the area. Most longshoremen were organized. It was practically a company union set-up with the ILA [International Longshoremen’s Association] . It’s a pretty bad set-up. So it’s the seamen that really needed the organizing, and so that’s why we got in there. That’s why it’s primarily seamen.

During the ‘34 strike, the Marine Workers Industrial Union helped get the seamen out on the sixteenth of May, to strike the place, in May, the ninth they got them out. We put out a bulletin called—well, whatever it was,

[?Sam Telford?] was the head of the thing. He died since then. It was just continuing to work among seamen. But longshoremen that were left-wingers, that were active in the movement, communists and communist supporters—they were all part of the MWIU set up, even though they belonged to the longshoremen. Which was then Paddy Morris' [Tacoma longshore worker known for being ILA loyalist] outfit. He was head of the district, and 3879 was the number of the local union here, like 3812 in Seattle, see?

[00:04:50] **HOWARD:** The thing that I'm trying to get out here is how much of an influence the MWIU and other left-wing organizations had among the longshoremen. Do you remember any idea, like how many longshoremen might have joined the MWIU or been close to it?

[00:05:02] **WALT:** Well, it was very small influence as far as the total membership. As such, there were outstanding people who subsequently became leaders of the longshoremen. People like [Harry] Bridges, [Henry] Schmidt, [Louis] Goldblatt—well, he was a warehouse man. [Germaine] Bulcke—

[00:05:20] **HOWARD:** How about in Seattle?

[00:05:23] **WALT:** Well, same thing in Seattle, except like when we had the first convention of the Maritime Confederation of the Pacific in 1935. There's only a couple of locals in that whole federation that were progressive. That was the radio operators' locals, ARTA [American Radio Telegraphists Association], the two locals of the longshoremen—the Everett [Washington] local, a cockroach local compared to the big ones, and 3879 down here. All the other locals were lined up with a phony position supporting the Morris machine. So I was a delegate to the convention from the firemen's union [Marine Firemen's Union].

[00:05:59] **HOWARD:** It was Everett, the local that was. . .?

[00:06:02] **WALT:** No, it was in Seattle. Oh, the other local was Everett, yeah.

[00:06:06] **HOWARD:** Why was Everett so progressive?

[00:06:08] **WALT:** Well, I guess there were a couple communists there, like Harry Pilcher [labor leader] —

[00:06:12] **HOWARD:** Oh, he was there. I thought he worked out of Portland.

[00:06:14] **WALT:** No, no, he worked out of there, unless many years later he went to [Portland]. But that was his home area.

[00:06:22] **HOWARD:** Can you think of anything concrete, actions that the MWIU initiated during the '34 strike or immediately afterwards? Rallies, demonstrations, education clubs, whatever?

[00:06:35] **WALT:** The trouble with trying to remember some of this stuff 50 years or more after it took place—kinda hard, you know? If I was reading some of the current history at the moment, it would recall to my mind some of the things. I'm sure we initiated quite a few odds and ends. If you have access to the Waterfront Worker, which was put out here in the '34 strike. That's at this library—what's the name of it here, in Berkeley?

[00:07:03] **HOWARD:** Yeah, and also the ILWU library. I just saw that. Doesn't contain much information, though, except on San Francisco. Most of it's—

[00:07:10] **WALT:** Which library are you talking about? The Bancroft Library?

[00:07:13] **HOWARD:** ILWU library has a copy.

[00:07:14] **WALT:** No, this is the Bancroft Library.

[00:07:16] **HOWARD:** They have a copy also, yeah; it's the same set of materials.

[00:07:19] **WALT:** Yeah, well, that's about the only thing. The Voice of Action, left paper in Seattle which carried a lot of longshore stuff. The Western Worker here and the Voice of Action up there. The Western Worker became the People's World in 1938.

[00:07:38] **HOWARD:** Can you give me any estimate of how many guys might have been in the MWIU from the longshore? Was it under five?

[00:07:47] **WALT:** Oh no, it wasn't under five. It was no big body, but it wasn't. . .

[00:07:54] **HOWARD:** Under 20?

[00:07:56] **WALT:** That's kinda hard to say.

[00:07:59] **HOWARD:** Or close or sympathetic to it. I mean, I realize membership is kind of an iffy category.

[00:08:04] **WALT:** Yeah, well, see you'd really have to talk to a longshoreman that was in there to get that. It's kinda hard for me. I'd be just guessing because my guess would be on the basis of the people I met around the Party.

[00:08:17] **HOWARD:** Give me a guess then.

[00:08:17] **WALT:** Well, I'd say maybe 25 or 30. That's a guess.

[00:08:23] **HOWARD:** Pretty significant. How about among seamen?

[00:08:25] **WALT:** There was a lot of seamen. Lot of seamen.

[00:08:30] **HOWARD:** Maybe 100? Or that's a little high.

[00:08:35] **WALT:** Seems like it's a little high, yeah. But it would be up there quite a bit. Of course, they wouldn't all be around all the time. They'd go out at sea and stuff like that.

[00:08:43] **HOWARD:** Maybe 75 or something like that?

[00:08:45] **WALT:** Kinda hard thing to say, but it's just like the Wobblies. I used to be a member of 510, the Marine Transport Workers.

[00:08:51] **HOWARD:** Oh, you were? I didn't know that. Oh, on the East Coast.

[00:08:54] **WALT:** Yeah. But for four years, before I got into the Marine Workers, from '27 to '31. So I had little idea of how many people. You could never tell, unless you were a secretary outfit or something, what the actual membership was. Or went to a convention and heard a report, and I wouldn't have remembered it. So I do know that the seamen were not organized on either coast. In '34 at all. The only seamen on this coast that were organized were the seamen that worked on Matson ships running to Australia. That was a compulsory deal. Otherwise, that's all. So, that was a good core of people to depend on for some pro-union activity.

But as far as the East Coast, it was just in '35 or '36 that they began to organize a little bit around the rank and file movement within the ISU [International Seamen's Union] . The little bit of developing unionism was in this ISU was so phony, they couldn't get anywhere because of the backwardness and conservativeness of the officials. The best that could possibly happen would be to get a small group around it.

[00:10:05] **HOWARD:** How extensive was the Wobbly influence when you got to Seattle? Were they an organized force, or just. . .?

[00:10:10] **WALT:** Not when I got there in '34. Their highlight was—I don't know, there's several books on them. But I remember, from personal experience, I know that there was very little, a little bit on Skid Road. Little bit of, come into an office, and somebody be around a coffee pot or something. Two people around. As far as it being some outfit that had a base or anything, it didn't have much of a base.

[00:10:38] **HOWARD:** How about its ideological impact? You know, the whole syndicalist approach, direct action—

[00:10:41] **WALT:** There was a lot of that in the union. You find that among the migratory workers, lumber workers, and seamen. People that are single primarily and not attached to a lot of mortgages and stuff like that. That's why the lumpenproletariat theory [Marxist theory of the unthinking underclass] developed in '23 by a couple of German leading communists.

You know, there was a big fight internationally on this subject. The idea was that the revolution can only be made by people of that caliber—the whores, the gamblers, you know, these people, lumber workers, seamen, stuff like that. That didn't get to first base because obviously, if you're going to win the influence of a majority of the working class, it's not going to be won by any maverick type of people. They've got to be pretty ordinary in the sense of their general family life and so on. They could be militant as hell, but they got to reflect—people got to be able to identify with them. You can't identify with a whole bunch of high pressure leaders, you know? There's got to be people among them on earth.

[00:11:47] **HOWARD:** What proportion of seamen were single? Do you have any idea?

[00:11:50] **WALT:** Oh, the overwhelming proportion. Hardly ever heard of a married man.

[00:11:53] **HOWARD:** Is that right?

[00:11:54] **WALT:** Oh yeah, you very seldom—after the union got organized, where it had a degree of security, then people got married. I know of a lot of people getting married in Italy or Japan because of the subservient nature of the women, who were so trained to give in and ass kiss—

[00:12:08] **HOWARD:** Oh, is that right?

[00:12:08] **WALT:** Yeah—the husband and all that kind of stuff. Yeah. But as far as the average seaman, he wasn't married at all. The only one you'd see married were the licensed seamen, the mates, skippers, engineers, and on. Because they'd been sailing for some time. After the seamen got organized, then, of course, quite a percentage of them got married. But never anywhere near a majority. Seafaring has always been a pretty single man's deal because, well, most wives wouldn't take too kindly to having the old man leave for two-thirds of his life. Even though it did seem like a honeymoon every time he did come to port. Yeah, I'd say the overwhelming majority—

[00:12:53] **HOWARD:** The longshoremen, more of them were likely to be married, right?

[00:12:55] **WALT:** Oh, yeah, longshoremen were practically—well, they were typical of the average working man, whether he worked near the water or away from the water. Percentage there would be the same as any other place, depending on their support ability. Their ability to support a family.

[00:13:09] **HOWARD:** So you were, I guess, a radical before you went to sea, right? Or did your experiences at sea radicalize you?

[00:13:14] **WALT:** No, no, I got radicalized while I was going to sea. The Wobblies got to me, and I was a poor kid all my life anyways so I was very susceptible to any kind of argument against the boss or class consciousness. Yeah, I got organized after I started going to sea. Hanging around the docks waiting for a ship with a couple of Wobblies just imparting all day long, and I was just eating it up. They didn't have to work hard to seduce me!

[00:13:45] **HOWARD:** [laughing] One thing I've noticed about the Wobblies—you know, there was that big split between them and the Party over the nature of political involvement in the trade union movement. When the Wobblies seem to have been strong on the West Coast in the longshore industry, especially Seattle and Pedro, they tend to be the most conservative politically of the locals on the coast. Do you think that makes any sense?

[00:14:06] **WALT:** No, it doesn't. I'm not familiar with the background of that, so I couldn't comment. I know there were other things besides the politics. The Wobblies had a whole lot of peculiar ideas like, for instance, in the Lawrence strike [strike of immigrant textile workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts; also called Bread and Roses strike] that did a beautiful job. A lot of stuff written on it. But they had this weakness of decentralization. They didn't figure anybody should be around too long, and after a year they should get out. They'd win a strike and leave, practically desert it. Or leave half a dozen, a small group, but never follow through. Didn't leave any contracts. It was closer to the straight-out syndicalism or anarchism, where the ideal condition is minimal or no organization. Well, you can't do business unless you have contracts and stuff like that. You could have a word of mouth thing, but you gotta be pretty powerful to have that stand up when the going gets tough.

Now, one of the things that kept me from being a Communist for the four years that I was in the Wobblies, the Wobblies were always saying, "These fucking Reds are raising a lot of money. They're playing us for suckers." The Marine Workers used to have a weekly seminar, sort of a local forum, and always a bunch of women came around. The Wobblies spread the story that the communists were using the women to sucker seamen into the movement. Well, I was as red hot for getting laid as anybody else was, but I was too principled to have anything to do with anything that would use women to line the people up. That kept me out a long time.

[00:15:36] **HOWARD:** Is that right?

[00:15:37] **WALT:** That and the ideas that the communists were taking advantage of the coal miners and miners' strike. Stuff like that, anti-communist stuff. Till I finally kept reading and reading about this, all the pamphlets and materials, stuff like that, and I came to the conclusion that that wasn't so. So I just dropped out of the Wobblies.

[00:15:55] **HOWARD:** Were you around when they had the funeral for Shelvy Daffron in Seattle? Remember that? He was the longshoreman that was killed.

[00:16:04] **WALT:** He must have been killed before I got there.

[00:16:05] **HOWARD:** Might have been earlier in the strike.

[00:16:07] **WALT:** Because July fifth was the killing took place here.

[00:16:09] **HOWARD:** Yeah.

[00:16:09] **WALT:** I didn't get out till somewhere in July, maybe the middle or something like that.

[00:16:13] **HOWARD:** But you don't remember any big incident about it?

[00:16:15] **WALT:** No, I would remember that. It probably took place either while I was in jail—see, I was in jail during the strike for a week or so. I think I finally got out of that.

[00:16:25] **HOWARD:** Let me ask you about that jail thing, too. Because I notice that people who were rounded up at the MWIU hall in Seattle, their ages tended to be between like 23 and maybe 28. They were all very young guys.

[00:16:35] **WALT:** Oh yeah.

[00:16:36] **HOWARD:** Why was that the case?

[00:16:38] **WALT:** I think there's a tendency for youth to be more progressive, and seamen in general seem to be younger in those days. I never did a survey, so I can't swear this. But it seems that way to me.

[00:16:52] **HOWARD:** There were older seamen, but they were just less likely to get involved in radical organizing?

[00:16:56] **WALT:** Yeah, it seems so to me. There were some—I know quite a few older Wobblies that were in the thing, but, well, even here, you had this fellow who just died a month or so ago. The building trades council for many years. He was a Wobbly. [?Dan Del Carlo?] . Then there's Murphy [inaudible] _____, he's still around. Up in Occidental [California] .

[00:17:23] **HOWARD:** Did you get around quite well—well, what were the relations between the MWIU and the remnants of the Wobblies in 1934? Was there hostility there?

[00:17:31] **WALT:** No, there just wasn't anything at all. We didn't see any Wobblies around or pay any attention to them. We didn't even know where they had an office. We saw their paper coming out once a month or whatever it was. I don't remember them having an office or anything around. I mean, the Wobblies that we met, that were dyed-in-the-wool hard Wobblies, they wouldn't touch a red, a communist with a ten-foot pole because they figured they were politicians or something. This kind of stuff.

[00:18:01] **HOWARD:** Do you know what kind of recruitment took place after the '34 strike, either in the Party or MWIU from among longshoremen or seamen? Have any estimate?

[00:18:13] **WALT:** No, I'm sure there was the work done. People were recruited, but I couldn't give you a gulp on what, when, where, any of that stuff. I know that there was a lot of fine work done, that The Western Worker became the official organ of the strike committee, and things like that.

[00:18:30] **HOWARD:** In Seattle also, huh?

[00:18:32] **WALT:** Well, no, The Western Worker didn't have influence up there. It was a California paper primarily.

[00:18:36] **HOWARD:** Oh, it was, ok.

[00:18:37] **WALT:** But it was very effective. And you had the ILD, the International Labor Defense, was very active in helping people out during the strike. All these harassment struggles and all that, they were very active. Some of those people are still around when they got rid of the ILD. She's still a member, and her husband [Karl Yoneda], he's Japanese.

[00:18:59] **HOWARD:** Oh, yeah, Elaine.

[00:19:00] **WALT:** Elaine Black. Yoneda's her name, now, Yoneda. They're still around.

[00:19:05] **HOWARD:** Did you guys issue The Waterfront Worker out of Seattle for a brief time in 1935?

[00:19:12] **WALT:** Jeez, I don't remember.

[00:19:15] **HOWARD:** Because I think I saw an issue in the ILWU library, and it had a Seattle, Washington byline.

[00:19:19] **WALT:** Maybe, I don't remember. I was a patrolman up there for four or five months out of that year for the firemen's union. But then there was the move on to kick me out on the basis of being a Red and all this shit.

[00:19:35] **HOWARD:** You were an open communist, right?

[00:19:36] **WALT:** Oh, yeah, I've always been an open communist.

[00:19:37] **HOWARD:** Why?

[00:19:38] **WALT:** Well, I had great pride in being a member of the Communist Party. I figured, why should I get in the fucking closet? Just the same as today, I'm very active in the running community [founder of San Francisco's Dolphin South End Runners Club]. Been on all these TV shows and in all these papers. Book written about me and all that stuff. I've never hesitated. I felt that I could do more good by being in the movement, although I don't proselytize people—the athletic movement wouldn't last long. We got a high percentage of military people; we've got enough colonels to organize a coup d'état! Except they'd probably organize it from the right.

[00:20:15] **HOWARD:** [laughing] Right.

[00:20:16] **WALT:** But we've got everything—policemen, all that stuff. So obviously. . . I mean, it's a kind of credit to an individual if he can hold his own under those conditions because most people, especially in those categories, they regard communism as about as opposite of apple pie and so on as you could get. So it's. . .

[00:20:39] **HOWARD:** Was it an individual decision for you to be open or was it a collective decision?

[00:20:41] **WALT:** Oh, it was a conscious decision of my own. You couldn't hardly make a decision for people to open unless they were on the payroll or something. No, I regarded myself as a professional revolutionary and very proud of the fact.

[00:20:59] **HOWARD:** It is remarkable. I remember seeing some campaign literature you put out, I think right after the war when you're running for an office in the Marine Firemen's—

[00:21:05] **WALT:** Oh, that thing on red-baiting, yeah. Oh yeah.

[00:21:09] **HOWARD:** You didn't hide anything there. [laughs]

[00:21:10] **WALT:** That's right.

[00:21:11] **HOWARD:** Talking about fighting for proletariat democracy and everything else. At the height of the Cold War, I thought that was pretty gutsy. [laughing]

[00:21:21] **WALT:** It's just like a man that in the Army that's gung-ho, a real gung-ho character like some of these Green Berets or some of these Marines moving up there and have the fucking machine gun, cut them in half, you know. This attitude. And I was young, too. My god, I was about 22 years old. Jeez, I was so sure of myself. I remember during the '32 election campaign, I'd climb up on George Washington's horse in front of some big Philadelphia [Pennsylvania] monument or something. Paste some "Vote Communist" slogans on each side of the rump of the horse—utterly ridiculous, stupid thing for a kid to do. Go up to the church door and "Vote communist" all over the fucking door. I'm sure I did more harm than good because that antagonized the shit of everybody. I mention that just to give you an idea of how gung-ho I was.

[00:22:09] **HOWARD:** [laughing]

[00:22:10] **WALT:** I got a little better sense today. When I was on these ships, we used to get in the mess room, like in these coal-burning ships. There'd be maybe 20 or 30 firemen in the mess room. I was a fireman then, you know. I'd be taking the whole gang on religion, arguing the atheist argument. We're all screaming our fucking heads, "AAAH!" "Cool off, Walt." Now today, if somebody wanted to be a fundamentalist or something, I wouldn't waste my time arguing with him because it's a waste of time. If somebody wanted to discuss religion and can do it coolly, sure. I'm an acknowledged atheist; I don't brag about it, but I don't hide it either.

[00:22:51] **HOWARD:** Well, it's interesting because only a handful of the Party people were actually as open as you were. [sound interference from the tape recorder]

[00:22:54] **WALT:** Yeah, that's true, that's true. Unless they were on the payroll and professional.

[00:22:58] **HOWARD:** Yeah, yeah.

[00:22:59] **WALT:** Well, it's understandable because life is made miserable. On a job, you'd get fired. I've had FBI people check me out dozens of time. Shit, even after I got screened off the ships and was hod-carrying [carrying supplies to bricklayers], I was doing some work on a Treasure Island Naval Base, Army Base and what have you. Christ, a crew of sailors with guns came over there one day. The commander says, "Is there a man, Mr. Stack working?" Boss says, "Yeah, there he is." Marched me off the goddamn freighter. You know, silly stuff.

[00:23:33] **HOWARD:** Yeah, it's tough. A lot of people couldn't cope with it.

[00:23:35] **WALT:** It was during the Korean War. They screened us off, and yet the law didn't prevent me—as a business agent, I could have been boarding ships all the time, if I was going to plant some, you know, thing. I could plant a bomb. So it was a ridiculous thing. It was obviously aimed at people who were doing the ship owners' arm. They weren't worrying about the war effort being hurt. That's bullshit.

[00:23:57] **HOWARD:** Let me get back here to the '34 strike. What happened—

[00:24:03] **WALT:** My knowledge of the '34 strike is very limited. I come the last couple of weeks.

[00:24:08] **HOWARD:** Ok, do you know anyone around who might more knowledge? Still living in Seattle?

[00:24:11] **WALT:** Oh, yeah, all kinds of people. Oh, from Seattle?

[00:24:13] **HOWARD:** Yeah, that's really what I'm after.

[00:24:15] **WALT:** Ah, let me see.

[00:24:16] **HOWARD:** Especially if they were longshoremen. I don't. . .Someone suggested a guy, Burt Nelson, in the longshore.

[00:24:23] **WALT:** I haven't seen him years, yeah. Is he living down there?

[00:24:25] **HOWARD:** Oh, I don't know. I called a guy up whose name is Burt A. Nelson in Seattle, and I said, "Are you the same Burt Nelson who was in Local 19, longshore?" He goes, "Nope," and hangs up the phone.

[00:24:34] **WALT:** 3812 is the local number.

[00:24:35] **HOWARD:** Yeah, ILWU 19. He just said, "No," and hung up the phone. So I suspect that was him but he just didn't want to bring up that stuff again.

[00:24:42] **WALT:** Maybe, yeah.

[00:24:43] **HOWARD:** A lot of these guys got shell shocked by McCarthy.

[00:24:45] **WALT:** Yeah, well, because if he was at all active, I would have heard about him. So, apparently. . .

[00:24:49] **HOWARD:** He was publicity committee—

[00:24:51] **WALT:** Oh, yeah, he was very active in the movement. Very. But I mean in the last number of years. I'm trying to think—I know a number of people in town that are former officers of the longshoremen's union, Harry [Bridges] and [Germaine] Bulcke and [Henry] Schmidt.

[00:25:07] **HOWARD:** I talked to all those guys, yeah.

[00:25:08] **WALT:** Yeah, all these people.

[00:25:09] **HOWARD:** I really want to get a sense of what was going on in the northwest because my feeling is it's very different than certainly San Francisco local. With the ILA.

[00:25:17] **WALT:** Well, it wasn't anywhere near as militant, that's the first thing, outside of Everett. Everett is.

. .

[00:25:21] **HOWARD:** Yeah.

[00:25:23] **WALT:** Matter of fact, I remember, can't think of his name now. They had a district council meeting—this is a couple years after the '34 strike. I got up in the council, and the president, a real phony son of a bitch, president of the local made some ruling there. I consider myself a pretty good parliamentarian. I studied it and taught it in some of our classes [labor history classes] . I appealed the decision to the chair. He said,

“Listen, you fucking red asshole, I will tell you something right now, you cocksucker, you can stick your appeal up your fucking ass. If you don’t like it, we’ll throw you out.” So I didn’t waste my time arguing. I knew that he was gonna get a couple goons and pick me up physically and throw right out the fucking door. So I just took it easy. I thought, “My time will probably come. I don’t know when!” So I just zipped up and let it go.

[00:26:14] **HOWARD:** I’ve seen a lot of letters in the Voice of the Federation talking about “Stack, that dirty red bum, throw him out,” stuff like that.

[00:26:18] **WALT:** Oh yeah, yeah.

[00:26:21] **HOWARD:** You were quite popular in those days, that’s for sure.

[00:26:24] **WALT:** Oh yeah, yeah.

[00:26:26] **HOWARD:** When did you come to San Francisco, then? Transfer down here?

[00:26:29] **WALT:** Well, I got in—there was a big beef in the union—it’s a long story—about this communism business. I went east for some reason or other. Then they raised the money among the officers of the NMU [National Maritime Union] to send me back out here.

[00:26:48] **HOWARD:** You came out with NMU, then?

[00:26:51] **WALT:** No, I wasn’t in the NMU or working for the NMU. They just—you know, Party people, left wingers.

[00:26:57] **HOWARD:** Ok.

[00:26:57] **WALT:** So I come out here—

[00:26:59] **HOWARD:** You’re still with the firemen then, right?

[00:27:01] **WALT:** Yeah. Active in the local and all that stuff. I think I took a ship out of Seattle, an around-the-world ship, the Adams. Anyway, when I came out here, I decided to stay down here because it seemed like much more solid ground. These charges and everything up there were thrown out, so they couldn’t.
..

[00:27:24] **HOWARD:** What were the charges? Do you want to talk about them?

[00:27:26] **WALT:** No, I don’t recall just what they were, unless just that I was a communist or something like that.

[00:27:31] **HOWARD:** That was against the union rules or something?

[00:27:34] **WALT:** No, I don’t think there was a constitutional provision. I got stuff up in my house, historical stuff, dealing with that stuff. I can answer that question with access to some of that stuff they put out or I put out at the time. I could look at it. But, without that, I can’t. . .

[00:27:50] **HOWARD:** Let me ask you one question before I leave the Seattle situation. After the strike, what kind of a difference did take place in the men’s minds about their job or their sense of power or dignity or something like that? Anything at all? When they came back after the ‘34 strike, the longshoremen certainly had a union. Seamen were in some—

[00:28:08] **WALT:** Well, there was a strong feeling. It wasn't a feeling of loss, like the strike had been lost, although they went back to work without winning their demands. It encouraged them to come forth in a couple years with the '36-'37 strike, which won hiring through the hall, really established once and for all an industry. But I think most people were encouraged and had a sense of unity. Had a union hall, and things were progressing. Still a long way from having job control, but it seemed to me that sentiment was morale was boosted.

[00:28:55] **HOWARD:** So you came back to San Francisco then, and you were here for the '36-'37 strike—

[00:28:59] **WALT:** I was representing the firemen's union in the coast policy committee during the '36-'37 strike down here. I was down here for about five or six weeks. I remember we flew up with the ballots calling off the strike, my first plane trip. Not too many planes running in those days, you know. The thing was all snowbound between here and that's why I had to fly up there. So I was on the coast policy committee, and we had meetings from time to time, and connections with negotiations. You'd have ask me something specific, and then I'm not even sure I could answer.

[00:29:36] **HOWARD:** Ok. Basically, what I'm trying to do when I'm writing this chapter on the '30s is get a sense of the impact of the left up and down the West Coast. What can you tell me about that during the '36-'37 strike? I know Sam Darcy, people like that in the Party, talked about recruiting over a 100 people in San Francisco and 40 or 50 in Seattle, something like that.

[00:29:53] **WALT:** Oh yeah, the Party had a big name in the area, no question about that in the '36-'37 strike.

[00:30:01] **HOWARD:** Why did the Party—

[END PART ONE/BEGIN PART TWO]

[00:30:05] **WALT:** —had done all during the '34 strike. The people that were in the strike, what they did, the leadership, the people around Harry Bridges, that group—and around The Waterfront Worker, which is the MWIU, and the idea that this fellow that was killed was a Communist. One of the four people or whatever it was on July 5th. You know, although he wasn't a waterfront worker. [Nick] Bordoise, I believe his name was. So the movement had a big name; it was very well regarded. It was making headway, good headway.

[00:30:44] **HOWARD:** Let me ask you a real tough question. How much of the support for the communists was on ideological or political grounds, and how much was because the communists were tough, known fighters? Maybe you can't separate the two. But it seems to me that you can get some real conservative pork choppers who just fight like hell for more pork chops, who are anti-communist to the bone. So I'm trying to disentangle the two threads there, whether it was just delivering the goods that the communists did so well, fought so hard. Or if they subscribed to their vision in some part.

[00:31:17] **WALT:** That's kind of a hard question to answer. I've never given it too much thought. I've always regarded the very conservative person as not much of a union person—maybe that's prejudice on my part as a radical. I sort of figured that people who were conservative were more interested in their—I'm talking about leadership now—more interested in their particular job and maintaining their standing in office and things like that. Or aspiring to office. But they weren't truly militant. Although I'm sure I'm wrong in some cases because there were people that were trade unionist that did a good job. In most cases, their influence is affected by their prejudice against Reds. you find that all throughout the labor movement. A lot of people that would be pretty good if it wasn't for their prejudice.

Then, of course, there's the difference between class collaboration and class struggle. A lot of people feel that they're doing a good thing if they talk the workers in Ford or General Motors or International Harvester into take a cut because a lot of people are getting laid off. Whether that's good sense of not, time will tell. But our attitude is that this isn't going to solve the problem for the bosses. It's going to give bosses throughout the country an opportunity to use that to cut in on the movement, take away stuff that they've had for years—which is taking place. But even that doesn't prove once and for all that we're right, and it's easy to understand why a worker with a family can't uphold these great principles because, if there's any doubt, he has to give the doubt to the family. So, if you're honest. . . you know what I mean?

Of course, that doesn't stop us from putting up a fight for the principle that we feel is important. But that's a hard question to answer.

[00:33:19] **HOWARD:** Yeah, it is a real tough question. I don't expect an easy answer. I know that. Maybe, let me ask it this way—the guys who you call the phonies, why'd you call them phonies, if you can be concrete?

[00:33:30] **WALT:** Primarily because they were against us, I guess.

[00:33:33] **HOWARD:** [laughing]

[00:33:33] **WALT:** If you really come right down to it.

[00:33:35] **HOWARD:** That's what I figured.

[00:33:35] **WALT:** Of course, their position, being against us, would be diametrically opposed.

[00:33:41] **HOWARD:** On what kinds of issues?

[00:33:42] **WALT:** Oh, on different issues. On what to do in a strike, how to do it, and when to do it. What to ask for, how much to ask for, all that stuff.

[00:33:53] **HOWARD:** You guys got accused of being phonies after about '35 or '36, when the Maritime Federation had the two factions, basically the syndicalists [proponents of economic organization where the workers own and manage the industry] and the Trots [Trotskyists] against the CP [Communist Party] —

[00:34:03] **WALT:** Yeah, but the people who were doing the accusing, like [Harry] Lundeberg and so on, he was lined up with the reactionary forces.

[00:34:08] **HOWARD:** Why do you call them “reactionary”? That's what I wanted to ask.

[00:34:10] **WALT:** Let's take the Republican Party compared to the socialists or communists or even the Democratic Party—a reactionary position. Take Reagan as an example.

[00:34:19] **HOWARD:** Ok, but how about in the trade union movement itself?

[00:34:21] **WALT:** Same thing applied. Lundeberg's policies were all for not pushing ahead with a strike, and making a deal with the ship owners, and opposing the militant section of the Maritime Federation when they were trying to improve conditions.

[00:34:39] **HOWARD:** But how about that question on quickie strikes, for instance? They wanted to push ahead. I guess the Party's line was that “we have to use moderation, we have to—“

[00:34:47] **WALT:** Now you're talking about the ultra-leftist position in the Labor Movement and the Party. They would regard us as phonies because we would be opposed to what we would regard as adventurism.

[00:34:58] **HOWARD:** But aren't those ultra-leftists, as you called them, the same people that you just called the reactionaries, or not? No?

[00:35:02] **WALT:** There's a reactionary position oftentimes by ultra-leftists, but I wouldn't ever call Lundeberg or those people that were the ideologues of the anti-communist movement in the industry as ultra-leftists.

[00:35:18] **HOWARD:** Those labels are just really confusing sometimes. I guess that's the problem.

[00:35:21] **WALT:** After you work with them for years, you get that used to them. Take Lundeberg—he took a very negative position on so many things. Just name the struggles that went on over a period of months or years, and just check who took what position on each. That's one way to do it. If you wanted to get a concise picture.

[00:35:42] **HOWARD:** It's often times not that simple, like the whole question of job actions and stuff. Lundeberg and those guys said, "Let's keep pushing ahead. Let's push it for total job control." The Party's position was, "No, we're going to alienate middle class people. We're going to lose support from other part of the Labor Movement. We have to tone it down." If you look at that in a vacuum, out of context, it would look like the Party was taking a reactionary position.

[00:36:04] **WALT:** Yeah, I can understand it would seem that way sometimes. But, now, his break with the left came with the steam schooner strike in 1935. In the Maritime Federation of the Pacific, setting up the convention, we backed him for the president of the federation

[00:36:21] **HOWARD:** Oh, is that right? I wasn't aware of that.

[00:36:24] **WALT:** Oh yes, sure, because I remember—

[00:36:26] **HOWARD:** Then what about the steam schooner strike? What happened there?

[00:36:28] **WALT:** Well, when the steam schooner strike took place, that's where he and Bridges split, and that's where the first beginning of the fight between the right and the left. Between Lundeberg, representing the right wing, and Bridges representing left. He was opposed to the strike for some reason. I don't remember the details. I was on the strike committee, the firemen's union, here in San Francisco. That was in '37.

[00:36:51] **HOWARD:** But you remember Lundeberg being opposed. This was in 1935?

[00:36:54] **WALT:** Oh yeah. That created all this friction. He was—I don't remember whether he was opposed to going out on strike. I'd have to look through the records.

[00:37:03] **HOWARD:** I can take a look at that.

[00:37:04] **WALT:** It's very vague in my mind. Without a doubt, that's where the split took place between Lundeberg and the left. Up to that time, he was a great supporter of Bridges. He couldn't say anything wrong about Bridges. Bridges this, Bridges that—right down the line. 100 percent. He wasn't a communist, but I remember him. He was a patrolman for Sailors Union of the Pacific, out of the port of Seattle during the '34 strike. He's a good joe; he got along beautifully. I got along with him. So did the rest. But after that, he was a miserable, no-good, rotten son of a bitch. Surly, and consistently, without fail. Right till the time he kicked the bucket.

[00:37:43] **HOWARD:** I think we were talking a little bit about the '36-'37 strike in San Francisco. We just began to talk a little bit about the Party's influence in that, the fact that they built up some kind of support and prestige during the thing. Can you give me any sense of all about how many guys might have been recruited? I'm not doing this as an FBI—I just want to get a handle, a solid handle if I can, on something.

[00:38:10] **WALT:** It's kinda hard to do. Unless a person was in that department or something, handling it and knew the figures, I wouldn't have any idea. I know that, following the '36-'37 strike, our movement got real big. But, of course, if you study that, there's certain international changes.

See with the advent of the Second [sic, Seventh] World Congress of the Communist International, the basic line was changed from fighting for an immediate revolution all over the world [Third Period] to the idea of fighting against war and fascism as a tactic [Popular Front]. So that broke down a lot of sectarianism that existed in the movement. Such sectarianism as the idea of opposing formal marriages and working on a free love culture set up and all that kind of stuff. It became more of a solid background thing, and it became more of an American movement than a foreign-born movement. Before, up to say '37-'38, just before the war, it was overwhelmingly foreign-born among different Slavic and different groups. Of course the Jewish were a large percentage of the militant, leading group.

But after '35 World Congress decision to emphasize our struggle against war and fascism, we quit working with the left unions and made serious efforts to merge with the AFL [American Federation of Labor]. We made some serious errors and burrs in some cases where we might not have as a result of, fur workers [International Fur & Leather Workers Union] and a few other places, but the mood tended to be good. That's why I happened to get into the firemen's union, that feeling of duty, because otherwise I would never have joined an AFL union. And six months later, I was elected as an officer of the union, so it speaks well for—

[00:40:11] **HOWARD:** And you were open at that time, right?

[00:40:11] **WALT:** And I was wide open, yeah. I was a communist, but I had a good name. They figured, well. .

[00:40:18] **HOWARD:** What do you mean, you had a good name? What does that mean?

[00:40:21] **WALT:** Well, I was well-regarded.

[00:40:22] **HOWARD:** Why?

[00:40:24] **WALT:** Because of my position before the strike and after the strike and general articulateness and militancy and understanding of what's going on.

[00:40:35] **HOWARD:** Ok, let me ask—let me pose a hypothetical question. I'm a rank and file guy in the firemen's union. Somebody comes up to me and says I should vote for Stack. "Why? He's a communist." Now what would be running through the other guy's mind if he was going to try and deal with that response? Would he be saying, "Well, yeah, he's a good communist, and we should be supporting that because that represents the interests of the working class." Or would they say, "Forget it. That doesn't matter. He still delivers the pork chops."

[00:40:56] **WALT:** Yeah, that's what a lot of them would say, yeah.

[00:40:59] **HOWARD:** The second one, right?

[00:40:59] **WALT:** No question about that, sure. Lot of them would say that.

[00:41:02] **HOWARD:** So, the fact that you were associated with the Party was almost a handicap, or was it? In terms of the rank and file? Or was it a plus?

[00:41:09] **WALT:** Well, under certain conditions, a handicap. Under others, a plus. But, despite this handicap, under certain conditions, we were able to move ahead. That's, I say, despite a handicap, but once you got in there and people could see that you were no different than anyone else in terms of you didn't have any horns, or you weren't advocating taking up pistols and going out and shooting a boss or anything. Just a normal individual.

[00:41:37] **HOWARD:** When the '35 decision was made at the International level about the move to the Popular Front, did it have any consequences inside the unions themselves? Was there less emphasis on militancy? Did people push a little less hard?

[00:41:51] **WALT:** Oh, I don't think so, no. It's just that they made a basic decision about the sectarian approach to the working class. Instead of sticking out in the left union and being isolated in the sectarian organization, we felt this is where the masses are going now. We were on the ballot after the '34 strike; we didn't get to first base. We came to the conclusion that the proper thing to do, 'this is where the masses are, this is where we belonged.' Some of us are going to have a tough time getting in there because of our Red record, but we just gotta keep at it till we get in there. Once we get in there, we'll establish ourselves, and people will regard us well enough to. . .

[00:42:36] **HOWARD:** But you don't remember any conscious attempt to downplay militancy inside the unions or anything like that?

[00:42:40] **WALT:** No, I don't recall anything like that, no.

[00:42:44] **HOWARD:** That's very significant. A lot of people accused the Party of just following the dictates of Moscow [Russia] and then saying, in the Third Period, they basically put a clamp on militancy.

[00:42:54] **WALT:** I never heard of any of that—

[00:42:55] **HOWARD:** No?

[00:42:55] **WALT:** Any clamp or have any recollection of any effort to play anything down. If we went into a new outfit, we ordinarily would be a little less inclined to make a lot of noise because we were trying to establish ourselves. But beyond that, I wouldn't know.

[00:43:12] **HOWARD:** Ok. so it would be real hard to provide an estimate of recruitment in '36 or '37, right? I mean, a sense of what kind of an impact it had. I don't know how else to approach it, if I'm trying to assess the impact in '36-37. Darcy and guys like that talked about very successful recruiting, but they're reluctant put a figure on it.

[00:43:35] **WALT:** Well, yeah, but it's a hard thing to answer for reasons that I didn't have access to the statistics and I wasn't that interested.

[00:43:43] **HOWARD:** Yeah. Well, did you recruit anyone yourself?

[00:43:45] **WALT:** I always did a lot of recruiting. Shit, I won prizes for doing the most in the state.

[00:43:49] **HOWARD:** Did you?

[00:43:50] **WALT:** Oh, yeah. I was always lining up people. But I—

[00:43:53] **HOWARD:** How about '36-37? Did you recruit during that period?

[00:43:55] **WALT:** Oh yeah, all of it.

[00:43:57] **HOWARD:** Do you know how many you brought in? Have any idea?

[00:43:58] **WALT:** No, but I was very conscientious about that thing. I kept in my mind all the time. If a man showed the slightest bit of progressivism, liberalism, I was out there, proselytizing, trying to bring him along. Oh yes, working all the time. Like I told you, I was a real—well, if you were outside, you might say a real fanatic.

[00:44:26] **HOWARD:** Let me show you something that I found in The Voice of the Federation. It's dated 1938. This guy—it's not correctly titled. It's a letter to the editor here titled, "Quits the Communist Party," but actually that's misleading. He's talking about attending a waterfront section meeting of the Party. He says there's 500 people there, in San Francisco. Does that seem possible?

[00:44:50] **WALT:** 500? Waterfront section meeting? The whole section, yeah, I guess so.

[00:44:56] **HOWARD:** Is that right?

[00:44:58] **WALT:** What year is this supposed to be?

[00:45:00] **HOWARD:** It's 1938. I don't know—you may know the guy. He was in the Party, he says. Mays or something. H. J. Mays. Marine Cooks and Steward [Marine Cooks and Steward Union] .

[00:45:10] **WALT:** That's [?Barney Mays?] .

[00:45:10] **HOWARD:** Is that [?Barney Mays?] ?

[00:45:12] **WALT:** It must be.

[00:45:13] **HOWARD:** I didn't think he was MCS [Marine Cooks and Stewards] . Was he?

[00:45:15] **WALT:** No, he wasn't, unless he got in there or something. Well, if it is, I can't think of another Mays offhand. I might remember him—

[00:45:23] **HOWARD:** Because he was the editor, right, of this thing for a while? [?Barney Mays?] ? Wasn't that the deal?

[00:45:26] **WALT:** Yeah, a little short guy. Yeah.

[00:45:29] **HOWARD:** Does it seem plausible that there could be 500?

[00:45:32] **WALT:** Not at that time, that doesn't—well, during the war, when we got real big, then if we had a meeting of all the cooks, then it might. Because I was chairman of the section, seamen and all that. We had big meetings.

[00:45:45] **HOWARD:** So, during the war, it's possible there could have been 500. You doubt it at that stage, though, right?

[00:45:49] **WALT:** Yeah, I doubt that.

[00:45:51] **HOWARD:** It's a very confusing letter.

Now, who'd be included in the waterfront section? Would it just be guys connected with the maritime trade primarily, or would it be other people who just live in the area?

[00:46:05] **WALT:** Oh, in the section, they'd have to be connected to maritime trade to be in that section. Otherwise, they'd be in some other section of the movement.

[00:46:11] **HOWARD:** That's a significant base, it seems to me. 500 during the war.

[00:46:14] **WALT:** Oh, yeah, that's good.

[00:46:17] **HOWARD:** Well, my impression is the Party might have had 25 or 30 guys or something in a port.

[00:46:23] **WALT:** Oh, no, no, we had big turnouts. Especially during the strike because all the seamen were around then. Of course, even ports like Baltimore where there's about 900 people, a high percentage of them were associated with the left. That's before I came out here.

We had federal control of relief. The relief office just turned the checks all over to us. We had complete domination, that whole waterfront. We got all the federal relief. All the seamen that were on relief, in order for the restaurants and different outfits to do it through us. We'd pass it out—

[00:47:01] **HOWARD:** This is the union you're talking about then, right?

[00:47:03] **WALT:** How's that?

[00:47:04] **HOWARD:** This is the union, when you talk about "us"?

[00:47:06] **WALT:** Well, no, the Unemployed Council [organized by Communist Party] .

[00:47:07] **HOWARD:** Is that right?

[00:47:08] **WALT:** Yeah. The Marine Workers Industrial Union had job control of the port, and we were able to do business. We were so well organized that even the little cockroach merchants, we'd have them parade up and down to City Hall for some demands. We'd get these people to carry placards that in 100 years wouldn't carry placards if their very existence didn't depend on it, with the Depression and everything else. Shit, we had the International record on the jukebox machines. Subscribe them to the Daily Worker. Outfits that never in 100 years would do that. Yeah, that was a big time. Well, we were fighting for Social Security. Got a gang of 44 seamen one time to Washington, DC. That's a 44-mile walk, too. I was in charge of that committee. So there's a lot of people who were very active.

[00:48:00] **HOWARD:** But you think the figure of 500 might have been a little high for the '38 period?

[00:48:03] **WALT:** It seems to me, yeah, it seems to me it was.

[LOUD BACKGROUND NOISE DURING CONVERSATION]

[00:48:09] **HOWARD:** Ok, let's see. I guess there really isn't too much more that I wanted to ask you. I just wanted to basically cover the period of the '30s to be honest. Any other comments you want to make about the '30s or the role of the Party and stuff like that?

[00:48:21] **WALT:** Not offhand. See, it's a memory thing, you know when you go back in the—50 years. If I was doing this with a serious effort to get right down to the nub of some of the questions, and answer them as concretely as I could, I'd be going through some stuff of the period. I got a bunch of that stuff. But just to do it offhand, it's pretty hard.

[00:48:43] **HOWARD:** I realize it's tough.

[00:48:45] **WALT:** I got an appointment at three o'clock with a lawyer friend of mine up in town. So let's see. It's 1:51pm. That's gives me a half hour to take a bath, jump on my cycle, and get up there.

[00:48:55] **HOWARD:** You ride bike?

[00:48:57] **WALT:** Yeah, well, the only time I use a car is at night or in the rain, stuff like that.

[00:49:04] **HOWARD:** What kind of bike is it? I'm curious.

[00:49:05] **WALT:** Just a beat-up looking bike, with a basket on it. It's ten speed, but I got a big seat on it. I used it in this Ironman thing last year in Hawaii.

[00:49:15] **HOWARD:** Oh, is that right?

[00:49:16] **WALT:** I did 112 miles.

[00:49:16] **HOWARD:** I heard about that. That's incredible. I can't understand how you can do stuff like that.

[00:49:19] **WALT:** I didn't use this bike; I used a better one. It's kind of a beat-up thing.

[00:49:24] **HOWARD:** Well, I guess that's probably all I have to do here.

[END PART TWO]